

Our stubborn prejudice about donkeys is shifting as they protect Australia's sheep from wild dogs

Jill Bough

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Education and Arts University of Newcastle, PO Box 127, Ourimbah, 2258

jillbough@newcastle.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Our complex and contradictory relationships with animals is demonstrated in our relationships with donkeys *Equus asinus*. The Australian context exemplifies these conflicting attitudes: once exploited as a beast of burden in the Outback in colonial times, the donkey has since been constructed as a pest to farmers, a feral animal that does not belong, and vermin to be exterminated. The latest incarnation is interesting as the donkey is once again proving 'valuable' as the guardian animal of choice for some farmers and pastoralists seeking to protect their flocks from wild dogs *Canis lupus familiaris*.

There is an interesting inter-relationship between the domestic animals in this context: the sheep *Ovis aries* (valuable to humans), the wild animals: the dogs, (valued as the usual favoured companion but in this context, as a pest to be destroyed) and the donkeys (valuable again in their guardian role rather than a feral pest to be shot). To add to the irony of this situation, some of the donkeys employed in this way are feral donkeys, which blurs the lines even further. What are the deciding factors in the status we assign to animals? I contend that utilitarian economic considerations outweigh any other.

Key words: guardian animals; domestic animals; feral animals; human and non-human animal relationships

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Introduction

Wild dogs are killing the wool industry in Queensland. The dingo fence is useless, poison baiting isn't working and the law that says land owners must control wild dogs isn't enforced. Now dog numbers have reached epidemic proportions (Arthur & Tapp 2012).

Nearly 3,000 people turned up to see 150 Northern Territory feral donkeys and camels go under the hammer at Echuca in northern Victoria on Saturday (Brain 2013).

Minister for Agriculture Barnaby Joyce welcomed the 2014 report by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARES) (Wicks *et al.* 2014) as it was "the first time that any research has examined the full impact of wild dogs in Australia – the economic, social and environmental costs" (Live 2014). However, his concern for the economic costs to farmers was paramount, whether the loss of livestock or the costs of wild dog control. Consideration for the animals involved is of little consequence in comparison to the economic benefits derived from them.¹ A recent study (Allena & West 2013) proposed that wild dog attacks are a critical factor in the decline of Australia's sheep flock. They predicted that without a range of control methods the rangeland sheep industry would disappear within 30–40 years.² A small part of those programs includes the use of guardian animals, usually

dogs but also, increasingly, donkeys to protect the flocks from predators.

Twenty donkeys were shipped to South Australia from Afghanistan in 1866, along with the first consignment of camels, for draught and haulage purposes in the drier regions of the continent.³ From there, they journeyed to arid outback areas of western and northern Australia because of their ability to survive where horses and bullocks could not, especially in times of drought. They were formed into great teams as they hauled wool to ports and railheads or carted goods to isolated stations, playing a vital role in the economy of colonial Australia. However, with the advent of motorised transport from the 1930s onwards, donkeys became redundant to European colonisers. From being 'valuable' beasts of burden they became 'alien' and 'destructive vermin' to be exterminated. I ended my research into this journey of the donkey from 'value to vermin' in Australia with the words: "For the donkey, the journey from vermin to re-valuing must now be taken" (Bough 2008). This paper describes one small step in that direction. Now that individual donkeys are finding favour as guardians for flocks, they are once again being allocated a useful status; however, the majority of wild donkeys in Australia remain condemned to death.

Our relationship with animals has been a matter for debate down the centuries and there are many theories underpinning human and non-human animal interactions.

¹ This is based on an economically 'rational' perspective e.g. (Quiggin 1997)

² The Australian sheep flock peaked at 180 million in 1970, but has since declined sharply to 74 in million in 2011 (DM Forsyth, 2014).

³ A few donkeys arrived in 1793 into NSW but had not been extensively used.

Arguably the most influential work in the field of animal ethics in recent years has been that of Peter Singer (1975). His main argument is that as animals feel pain they are worthy of moral and ethical consideration just as humans are: to treat them otherwise is unacceptable. Tom Regan (1983) goes further when he argues that adult mammals have sentience and desires, what he calls “subjects of a life”: they are creatures that possess inherent value. These beings should never be “sacrificed or traded off to achieve some greater good, nor treated solely as a means to an end” (Regan 1983). Sentience is the criterion that gives moral status to animals. The ‘animal movement’ which has grown exponentially in the past 50 years, reminds us of the crucial point that how we treat animals depends upon our moral assessment of their worth (see for example, Garner 2005).

The case of the donkey demonstrates that non-human animals continue to be judged according to their utility to humans, their merits measured purely by the benefits they afford. They are ‘resources’ to be used, rather than sentient beings, appreciated as animals with lives fundamentally similar to ours. Animals are socially constructed as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘friend’ or ‘foe’ and they can move between these categories depending on the status assigned them within certain contexts. While the vast majority of dogs are the favoured companion animals,⁴ others have now been assigned outsider status, the unwanted ‘other’. In a further twist, feral donkeys are being used to control feral dogs: we are now using one ‘pest’ species to help control another. When Marc Bekoff asks who lives, who dies and why in the preface to a book on compassionate conservation, he affirms that it should not be all about us but it usually is (Bekoff 2013).

This paper outlines the development of the use of so-called ‘guardian donkeys’, especially those captured and trained from their feral state. Some historical background is provided, both in the use of guardian donkeys, especially from the USA and Canada where their use is more widely appreciated; and in the complexities of the categorising of animals in the Australian context. The sourcing and use of guardian donkeys is largely explored through three contemporary case studies. Questions are raised about the continuation of the instrumental, utilitarian view of animals and the value placed on them by humans. It suggests that without investment in proper training for the donkeys involved, they will continue to suffer, even die. Should human interests and economic considerations be placed above the needs of the animals involved?

Wild, domestic or feral?

All donkeys, dogs and sheep in Australia are either domestic or labelled as ‘feral’. None are actually wild animals, even though they may fend for themselves ‘in the wild’. Although there has been much debate about the nature of domesticity, (see for instance, Bulliet 2005; Diamond 1998; Zeuner 1963) a domestic animal has been described as one: “that has been bred in captivity, for purposes of subsistence or profit, in a human community that maintains complete mastery over its breeding, organization

of territory and food supply” and one could add, length of life (Clutton-Brock 1994). Anthropologist and philosopher Barbara Noske (1989) argues that domestication is about social and economic power which has led to the extensive manipulation and exploitation of non-human animals at the hands of capitalist societies.

When these same animals escape human mastery, another type of creature is created: ‘wild-domestic’ animals, an ambiguous group “of indeterminate use and meaning”. They were labelled as ‘feral’, their construction as a separate category a recent development (Franklin 2006). A ‘feral’ animal is defined as one that was initially introduced for human utility but that subsequently has established populations that survive and reproduce in the wild (Berger 1986).⁵ Many escaped or were turned loose, multiplied to form large herds and became ‘feral’. This happened to donkeys in the Australian context. They lost out as they competed with domestic stock, sheep and cattle which brought wealth to Australia. More recently, domestic dogs which have escaped or been abandoned and are breeding in large numbers, are being labelled in similar ways. Naming is a powerful tool in the formation of attitudes and consequent actions. Language situates them as the unwanted ‘other’: they become ‘pests’ and ‘vermin’ which places them outside any “moral consideration”.

The context

Wild dogs (and foxes *Vulpes vulpes*) are major agricultural pests in Australia causing severe financial losses in the livestock industry. Wild dogs include dingoes *Canis lupus* dingo Australia’s original ‘wild dog’, ‘feral dogs’ European introduced domestic dogs which have subsequently escaped into the wild, and their hybrids.⁶ Recent reports and scientific studies into the social and economic impacts of wild dogs and their management reflect growing concern in this area (for example, Ecker 2015). McLeod (2004) estimated the cost to the Australian economy of wild dog attacks as \$66.3 million annually, including the loss of livestock, and costs of wild dog control measures. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, half a million sheep were destroyed by wild dogs from central Western Queensland alone between 2008 and 2011.⁷ A recent paper which evaluates the economic costs as well as environmental and social impacts estimates those costs over 20 years in Western Queensland to be between \$2.4 million and \$54 million, in the absence of effective wild dog control (Wicks *et al.* 2014). Techniques to control wild dogs include exclusion fencing, guardian animals, shooting, trapping and poisoning (Southwell *et al.* 2013): none is entirely effective.

The use of guardian animals is considered to be a humane and natural method to limit wild dog attacks. The most

5 Extensive pastoralisation in Australia encouraged the process of feralisation in the Australian Outback; one of the most successful of these was the donkey.

6 On average adult wild dogs weigh between 15 and 25 kilograms. There is great variation in coat colour from sandy yellow to black, white and brindle. They live in small packs and are mostly active around dawn and dusk.

7 As at June 2014, the Australian sheep flock was estimated to have been 72.2 million head.

4 Of Australia’s 8 million households, 2.9 million or 36% own a dog according to the Australian Companion Animal Council, (2010).

popular guardian animal in Australia is the Maremma Sheepdog. It is a fine irony that the favoured companion animal of many humans, the domestic dog is used in the war waged against their own kind, the wild dog (Andelt 2004). All animals intended as guardians require basic training and each has their benefits and disadvantages which need to be understood.⁸ While research has confirmed the success of the use of guardian dogs in Australia (van Bommel 2010), there has been limited research completed on other types of guardian animal. Although the success stories of donkeys as guardians in Australia are largely anecdotal so far, their use is becoming more widely appreciated.

Donkeys have exceptional hearing, a keen sense of smell and excellent vision. They use these senses to detect intruders. They bray, bare their teeth, chase, and attempt to kick and bite canine invaders. Some donkeys will also chase deer, bears, strange livestock, humans and other intruders in a similar fashion, according to Alberta Agriculture and Forestry (Bourne 1994). If the intruder does not retreat, the donkeys will rise up and strike out with their front feet, delivering a blow. One Alberta farmer Mr Dickson describes how his donkey operates:

McGovern doesn't go after them tooth and hoof. I've seen him just stand there and stare the coyotes down. It's like he's saying, 'I'm bigger than you,' and they slink away. That's better than chasing them, because he can spot the rest of the pack if they try to come in and get a lamb. He'll 'hee-haw' at 'em sometimes, too. If pressed, however, McGovern could use his hooves to good effect. One of the Alberta Agriculture burros killed a marauding 130-pound dog with a single powerful kick. (Andelt 2004)

Guardian donkeys: general

Donkey's instinctual dislike of canines has been used by humans to help guard their flocks and herds in different countries and situations. In recent years in Switzerland, for example, donkeys are being used in the Alps to protect sheep and goats from predation by wolves (for example, swissinfo.ch 2009). In the United States, North America and Canada, donkeys have been successfully employed in keeping coyotes, foxes, wild dogs and even bobcats away from flocks (Meade 2015; Tapscott 1997).⁹ Indeed, there are programs in the United States which assist ranchers with the implementation of non-lethal predator deterrent methods including guardian animals after public controversy over the poisoning of coyotes (Fox 2013).

Donkeys are the cheapest means of guarding sheep, goats and cattle, they cost little to maintain, they eat the same food as the flock or herd and are extremely hardy and long lived, so can remain with a flock for many years. Compared to guard dogs donkeys appear less prone to accidental

death, do not require special feeds and are less susceptible to traps, snares, M-44s, and toxic collars (Andelt 2004). As grazier Joe Baty put it: "A donkey will live for 50 years, and will basically look after itself. You don't have to sheer donkeys...and you don't have to feed them meat" (Muller 2015). Their utilitarian contribution to the bottom line is therefore a major consideration in their use.

Not all donkeys make good livestock guardian animals, as there are significant behavioural differences between individuals. It is certainly inadvisable to put a wild, untested donkey with a flock or herd of animals with which it is unfamiliar. Consistent and successful guardian donkey performance is more likely to arise from appropriate animal breeding and selection, as well as proper training and realistic expectations. Donkeys of a good size are necessary. A miniature donkey cannot be expected to tackle a couple of large wild dogs. Even if not specially bred and trained, the donkey needs at the very least to be friendly to humans and easy to handle.¹⁰ Donkeys are intelligent animals and learn quickly what is required of them but, if they don't want to do something, they won't be persuaded, so training is necessary (Bough 2011).

Factors which are more likely to lead to the successful use of guardian donkeys are early bonding with the flock, appropriate environment and flock numbers. If a jenny or gelding is brought up with a herd or flock, they may consider it theirs to defend.¹¹ According to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, the donkey should be introduced to the sheep as early as possible to increase the likelihood of the donkey bonding with the flock. Ideally, a jenny should have a foal which is raised within the flock. They are most successful in protecting livestock in small and level pastures, where the donkey can see all or most of the area from one location (less than 600 acres), in open pastures with no more than 200 sheep or goats. Large pastures, rough terrain, dense brush, too large a herd, and scattered sheep or goats all lessen the effectiveness of guardian donkeys (Meade 2015). However, ideal environmental factors are not always possible, especially in Australia where a number of donkeys still manage to operate successfully, as will be shown in the following section on the Australian experience.

Donkeys do not intentionally patrol the pasture looking for intruders; they investigate disturbances within their home area and will pursue predators or intruders if they detect them. Indeed, it may well be true that the donkey has little real interest in guarding its paddock companions. Donkeys are well known for their strong sense of self-preservation. As one experienced owner, Christine Berry (personal communication June 4, 2015), put it:

"I sincerely believe the donkey has no real interest in the wellbeing of its paddock mates, be they sheep, goats, calves, horses or other species. I believe the donkey has a strong self-interest, self-preservation instinct and whomsoever shares his grazing area shall benefit from this hatred for predators with their own best interest and safety foremost".

⁸ There are disadvantages in using dogs, for example: they require careful selection and training and appropriate husbandry and health care and there is often a high initial cost; cannot use baits for the wild dogs and foxes; they can easily escape through fences; they may kill a neighbours' sheep.

⁹ Coyotes and dogs had been a major problem at the University of Rhode Island's Peckham Farm, home to a prize-winning flock of Dorset sheep. Since buying a guardian donkey, they have not lost another animal.

¹⁰ For a detailed account of the advantages of, the obtaining and training of a guardian donkey see (Bourne 1994).

¹¹ Jennis are generally found to be more suitable but if using a jack, it should be gelded before being introduced to the flock. Some jack donkeys may attack smaller animals including calves and lambs.

However, others will provide anecdotal evidence of their donkey not only chasing away intruders but also herding their sheep to safety or standing over the ewes while they are lambing, presumably to keep them safe (for example, M. McFarlane personal communication Dog and Fox Management workshop, LLS, Hunter, NSW, August 8, 2014; G. Dick personal communication Donkey Matters Seminar, Lochinvar, May 25, 2015). Many have reported the success of their guardian donkeys in terms of reduced stock losses and many more have seen them chasing off dogs. However, as the donkey's main work is often at night, much of the interaction between donkey and dogs has not been witnessed. Bearing in mind individual differences, there is a need to work towards better understanding of what motivates donkeys to guard and in what circumstances.

Australia

One of the earliest reported success stories with donkeys in Australia came from Darling Downs grazier Bruce McLeish who turned to guardian donkeys after losing 300 sheep worth \$110,000 to wild dogs in 2007. He researched the use of donkeys as guardians in the USA and said that it was the hardiness of the animals which finally persuaded him to try them out. 'The donkeys eat the same as sheep, are easy on fences, and if you're in harder country like we are, you don't have to do anything with their hooves as they naturally live in the desert' (Shackle 2013). Andrew Martin, a grazier near Tambo, just inside the dingo fence in Queensland, explained that of all the pressures on rural producers in that region, wild dogs were the most insidious and destructive. He reported the wild dogs to be bigger, stronger and tougher than the dingoes. His flock varies between 8,000 and 12,000 head, depending on the season. One year Martin lost the lambs of 1,000 ewes to overnight raids by dogs while John Chandler reported the loss of 10,000 sheep to dogs at his Blackwall property over the period 1998 to 2011 (Eastley 2015).

Although some graziers have turned to raising cattle instead of sheep for this reason, Martin explained that for cattle producers struggling through drought the problem is still devastating. Dogs surround weak cattle and kill their calves, which are sometimes eaten as soon as they are born. He had tried using alpacas and Maremma Sheepdogs to guard his flock, but they were not successful. This was turned around when he discovered the use of donkeys as guardians.

"In Australia they have not a very good status or reputation but they are very intelligent, very patient and very hard working. They are taken for granted. The only thing they don't like is dogs..... The donkeys can't stop the dogs from coming in but they can kick, fight and bellow and usually, if the dogs do get the odd sheep, they are caught in a corner and you can see where the donkey has sent the dog over the fence" (Chan 2014).

Examples such as these in the media add to the stories of the small scale but successful use of guardian donkeys in Australia. Indeed, there is now a waiting list for donkeys in New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland donkey sanctuaries after reduced stock losses have been reported. Sanctuaries in the Hunter Valley, NSW, for example,

have been training a few of the suitable rescued donkeys in their care as guardian animals.¹² These are domestic donkeys so are already used to human handling. Several small scale farmers in the Hunter Valley are happy to talk about the success of their donkeys (for example, G. Dick personal communication Donkey Matters Seminar, Lochinvar, May 25, 2015). This is one incident which well describes the interaction between domestic donkeys and wild dogs. This farmer had a small herd of donkeys grazing with her cows and their calves.

"I have seen my donkeys alerted to many feral/pack domestic dogs and wild pigs entering my farm, most memorable is 3 dingos with 2 pups on my land. The mature jennies and geldings took turns of braying an alarmed signal quite different to any other bray I heard. They even whistled high pitch alarms through their nostrils and it was these different deafening, terrifying noises that made me rush to their area where cows and calves were also grazing. At first I couldn't see the dingos, but pricked, focused donkey ears, heads and body language showed me their whereabouts. There was a stare-off between the two species, the whistling nostrils continued with stomping of forelegs from the line of mature donkeys that had formed. Behind them were younger donkeys and foals were in the rear protected from any dingo advance. The bitches' instincts turned them into a retreat. The pups were attacked viciously by their own mothers teaching them to flee, and yelping they too took cover in the woody scrub of the ridge, disappearing from sight. The donkeys were on guard for at least an hour after this encounter. The dingos did not return" (C. Berry email, March 21, 2015).

Graziers and farmers are turning to the use of guardian donkeys to protect their flocks; however, there are not sufficient suitable donkeys available for them. Farmers are catching wild donkeys and training them themselves. Bob Little from Moonbie Station near Mount Isa bought 20 wild donkeys that had been trucked in from the Northern Territory (NT) to guard his sheep from wild dogs which were "just slaughtering us". He reported that the donkeys were settling in well and that he would like to see a trade established between Queensland and the NT (Arthur & Tapp 2012). Landmark Queensland wool area manager Bruce Lines organised a shipment of 128 donkeys from central Australia in an initiative described as a win-win situation for traditional owners overrun with wild donkeys and Queensland landholders 'in need of a wider arsenal to fight wild dogs' (Cripps 2012). A spokesman said the Anangu people were delighted to assist graziers in sourcing donkeys, as it also protected the environment and provided a small economic benefit.¹³ Once Lines had found a way of sourcing the donkeys, the ability to help find a purpose for the feral animals became apparent. This is a major rethinking of the 'the feral

¹² The Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary and Donkey Welfare with Heart.

¹³ Bordering the NT, the APY lands cover more than 10% of the South Australian land mass, the home of around 2500 Anangu people. Anangu hold the title to these lands under the *Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Land Rights Act 1981*. The numbers of feral donkeys in this semi-arid region have skyrocketed as the Aborigines are not allowed to shoot them without permission. The Anangu people have used donkeys for transport since they were introduced by missionaries and pastoralists in the 1930s (Bough 2010).

animal problem': the use of a devalued animal which does not involve killing it (Bough 2010).

This is a situation unique to Australia where feral donkeys which were being constructed as a problem are being reimagined as guardian animals. Estimates of feral donkey populations vary considerably: five million was the estimate of one government paper (Department of the Environment and Heritage 2004). Systematic shooting programs have been running since the 1940s in the attempt to eradicate feral donkeys mainly because they are a financial threat to station owners, competing with cattle for feed and water. The donkey has been killed as vermin, their days as useful transporters in colonial times long forgotten (Bough 2008). Now perhaps a new value has been placed on their heads. Amber Driver from Elkdra Station, north of Alice Springs, for example, reported that a mob of 100 yarded donkeys caught during a muster had been sent east for guarding duties. "They are making a big impact on what little grass we have and our water supply for our cattle so it's really good to get the numbers down in a way that can be helpful for someone" (Liston 2013).

Joe Baty of Muella Station, north-west of Burke captures and transports feral donkeys to be used as guardian animals, as 'a handy side-line'. He travels long distances to find small mobs of 20 or 30 animals and drives them together: he mustered about 230 in 2014. {Ambrus, 1975 #1} The price he gets for the donkeys depends on the quality and whether or not he has familiarised them with sheep. Most of the donkeys are sturdy, large donkeys, descendants of the teams that operated in the area. He uses them himself, bonding them at home to the livestock they are going to protect, whether sheep or goats, by having them in the adjoining paddock for a couple of weeks (Muller 2015). Baty supplied the donkeys for the following project underway in the Riverina in NSW.

Case study 1: feral donkeys trained as guardians

In southern NSW, there is an initiative underway regarding the use and training of guardian donkeys. As there were no commercial breeders of large donkeys in the area, Mic McFarlane, the biosecurity officer for the Murray, organised the transport of nineteen feral donkeys from Burke to be used as guardian animals on properties in the Riverina.¹⁴ The feral donkeys, captured near Alice Springs, arrived in October 2013 and McFarlane took over their handling and training.¹⁵ As he was unfamiliar with donkeys, it was a matter of trial and error but he soon learnt how to handle them – and thought them "brilliant". He found the best way to train them was like a dog: in short, repetitive sessions. It took him only a few days to handle them, had them responding to voice commands within three days, ten days to halter and to lead after a couple of weeks.

"They're remarkable animals, they're super intelligent... The thing is if they don't want to do it, they don't do it. I really do believe now they are the philosophers of the

¹⁴ Each donkey cost \$500 to buy and \$180 to transport with funds from the Dept. of Lands wild dog control grant.

¹⁵ He had previously trialled three hand reared donkeys at one property and reports there have been no wild dog attacks since their arrival, despite howling dogs living in the hills above the property.

animal kingdom, they will stare and look and look, and until they are satisfied they will not move" ("Attack donkeys that prevent wild dog attacks on sheep are the philosophers of the animal world" 2013).

The donkeys were initially kept in a small yard with a few sheep or goats and the area and the number of animals slowly increased until they became companions, "the donkey wanting to protect them". He says these wild donkeys were trained within two months and have been successfully guarding sheep ever since. He reported that on one property that had lost 100 sheep in the previous year, there had been no attacks since the introduction of the donkey. The project is ongoing and being carefully monitored.¹⁶

Case study 2: feral donkeys captured and sold as guardians

There was little knowledge of how guardian animals operate in an auction of large numbers of feral donkeys organised at Echuca in Victoria in December 2014. The wild donkeys came from the APY Lands of the Anangu people. The APY Lands is a large Aboriginal local government area located in the remote north west of South Australia bordering the NT where donkeys are generally regarded as pests, of little commercial value and are shot by government agencies. The idea of using some of these donkeys in other areas, following the growing interest in the use of guardian donkeys, was instigated in this instance by David Loffel and his son who carried out their capture and transport to Echuca saleyards.

The donkeys were caught in spear traps when they came down to drink at night.¹⁷ They were then loaded onto transport trucks for their 3,000 kilometre journey to Victoria. Peter Loffel an experienced carrier of large animals reported that the donkeys transported well (personal communication March 4, 2014). Christopher Wener (personal communication March 10, 2014), the DEPI District Veterinary officer from Tatura, responsible for checking the welfare of the donkeys while they were held at Mooroopna, concurred. He also found the management of the donkeys satisfactory; there were some superficial injuries but they were in good body condition.¹⁸ However, he explained that he was powerless to act under the land transport act as the regulations of the code of practice were fairly loose, which suggests all was not ideal for the donkeys. Indeed, one of the donkey welfare representatives found that the "capture, journey and 3 months all mixed together showed evidence of horror with the mature jacks fighting, ears torn, nostrils ripped, and scars on bodies" (C. Berry personal communication March 3, 2014).¹⁹

¹⁶ There have only been two losses since the project began and he provided possible explanations for these. In one case involving a jenny, it was three days after the sheep moved to an unfamiliar paddock. In another, a jack had been recently gelded and was not feeling well. cvf

¹⁷ These are basically yards placed around water points fitted with gates that allow the animals to walk in but stops them walking out.

¹⁸ There was also an RSPCA Officer in attendance but he did not answer my calls.

¹⁹ Donkey Welfare with Heart. Jacks need to be kept apart and from jennies with foals.

The sale of the feral donkeys (and camels) at Echuca was widely advertised on Facebook and the response was overwhelming. Both the organising agent, Andrew Wilson, and sales yard manager, Willem Badenhorst, thought that the novelty of Facebook advertising was responsible and were gratified by the amount of interest raised and the subsequent crowds that attended the auction (A. Wilson and W. Badenhorst personal communications March 3, 2014). Much media interest was also raised by the unusual and much hyped sale and the large crowds which attended from across Australia.²⁰ There were 462 registered buyers and the stock was cleared out. Donkeys fetched higher prices than was expected. The 116 donkeys sold to an average of \$471 and topped \$2,100 for a jenny and foal. According to Wilson, the jennies sold for \$1100 - \$1200 reaching the prices he was hoping for (Twomey 2013). The jacks were more difficult to sell. There was some concern that the donkeys would end up in the meat works but they were fetching too high a price (Brain 2013).

It has been difficult to follow up on the buyers. With no access to names and only a couple of contacts, it would appear that no one is keen to report on the progress of their feral donkeys to be used as guardians. It seems likely that the whole project was inviting disappointment at least and disaster at worst. There is a strong possibility that there would have been deaths of stock, suffering, injury and maybe even death for some donkeys, and injury for inexperienced people handling them. It is certainly not appropriate to put wild, untrained donkeys, especially jacks, in with stock and expect them to become successful guardians, as the following example highlights.

Case study 3: one feral donkey bought as a guardian

The only buyer I have been able to contact and who was willing to talk to me tells a story that I am sure would be fairly typical. Marlene Winter desperately needed help as she lost hundreds of lambs each year to foxes and wild dogs and could not survive much longer on her property. She had three llamas guarding her flocks but they had virtually given up as the number of predators was so great. She heard about the donkeys being sold as stock protectors and rang Wilson who told her they would do the task with no training. She was hoping for a jenny in foal but they were fetching high prices, around \$2000, so she ended up buying a gelding. He was battle scarred, in poor condition, had chunks out of his ears and a broken rib.

He transported well and she put him straight in with the ewes as she had been told. He had presumably never seen sheep before and he picked on one to attack and had it down on its back, stomping on it. The llamas were terrified of him and chaos ensued. He escaped from the paddock, ran for two and a half hours, jumped fences and was desperate in his methods of escape. Marlene chased him in the 'ute. When she finally got him back in the yard, she rang Mic McFarlane as she had heard about his

²⁰ One reason farmers seeking guard donkeys from the Outback via Echuca auction was due to the size of the descendants of the large donkeys imported in the 1800s. Modern designer breeds are too small, thought to be not as robust in constitution with selectively bred sires and dams doubling up through a limited gene pool of less challenged instincts and gentle personalities.

success training guardian donkeys. He explained how to treat and train the donkey with patience and after 6 weeks she could put a halter on him and put him near the sheep. Without his help, this would have ended badly for all concerned. She was going to have the donkey put down (M. Winter personal communication March 14 2014). As McFarlane commented:

The biggest problem was that she was given the wrong information and what she was told by the seller was border line negligence with animal welfare issues...I don't know what this donkey's life was like before Marlene bought him, but the start he got at Marlene's property was not so good, he didn't have time to get over the travel, get to know his new environment or be introduced to his new role, probably taken from a herd situation to nothing... (M. McFarlane email March 16, 2014)

Marlene cares about all her animals and she followed the advice given to her. She is happy with the progress of the donkey and how he relates to the flock. He is now in with one mob of sheep, with one of the llamas and it seems to be working well as she has not lost any lambs. However, she described the donkey as "hysterical" each morning which she put down to his busy night of guarding the flocks (M. Winter personal communication March 14 2014). If the area is too large or the number of predators too high, the task can be overwhelming for the guardian animal.

Conclusions

There has been no systematic research into guardian donkeys and how they operate. McFarlane is following the success of his guardian donkeys on their respective farms and observing how they operate and in what circumstances. He intends to expand his project and has more feral donkeys being captured that he will train and distribute.²¹ He hopes to gain federal funding to set up a research project to understand the dynamics of donkeys as guardians, involving collar devices for sheep, dogs and donkeys. He wants to discover exactly how donkeys guard the sheep: do they drive them to safety, stand in the middle of the flock, or stand to one side? How do the predators work: individually or in teams, attacking from different sides? (M. MacFarlane email March 16 2014).

McFarlane's work highlights the importance of appropriate transportation, acclimatisation and training for feral donkeys intended as guardian animals. Information about the care and training of donkeys should be made available to farmers wishing to use them. So far, the success stories about guardian donkeys in Australia have been isolated and anecdotal. There needs to be a concerted and coordinated program into their use in Australia. With more research into how the prey, the guardian and the predator interact, perhaps guardian donkey use can become more widespread and even more successful.

This innovative project which uses one 'pest' species to help control another raises interesting questions about the changing relationships between the animals involved

²¹ He emphasises that the donkeys are one tool in a wider program of eradication but that if they can keep an area free then the wild dogs and foxes can be encouraged to go to other areas where they can more easily be trapped and baited.

and the value placed on them by humans. The feral donkey, considered vermin to be shot in some areas, is once again finding a valuable place in the farming community of other areas. Some land managers now see them as a resource that can be usefully employed to prevent domestic stock loss, thus saving considerable expense and wastage of animal life. The fact that they are relatively easy and cheap to maintain makes them desirable, along with their natural instincts, placid natures and learning abilities. If the most important outcome of land management is the sustainable use of resources then this is a win-win situation. If their lives in the wild are being threatened by shooting or starving, then this is a better option for the donkeys concerned. However, there are obviously only limited numbers of donkeys involved: it does not alter the situation of the extermination for the mass. There are wider issues which need to be addressed.

The donkey has been revalued because it is protecting valuable stock; it is a continuation of instrumental utilitarian attitudes. There are indeed those who are

learning about the intrinsic worth of donkeys along the way and valuing them for what they are as well as for what they do. However, we need to be sure that this new role is managed correctly to obviate any further suffering for the donkeys and, indeed, the other animals involved. As already stated, none of these animals are 'native': the dogs and donkeys 'feral', so who cares about their fate, beyond their economic worth? Noske (1989) maintains that 'feral' animals are "getting the worst of both worlds: they are considered neither an interesting species, nor of individuals worthy of somebody's moral concern". Indeed, while the image of donkeys may improve in Australia through their latest role, these measures do little to confront the larger issues concerning the perception and treatment of 'feral' animals.²² A wider and more informed community debate about 'feral' animals and their treatment is needed to address the moral, ethical, historical, social and environmental implications of continued mass slaughter of donkeys and other animals.

22 Compassionate conservation advocates ways forward (for example, Ramp, Ben-Ami, Boom, & Croft 2013)

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APPENDIX I

Thanks to Mic McFarlane for the following photographs of the feral donkeys he trained as guardians in the Riverina



The feral donkeys arrive by truck

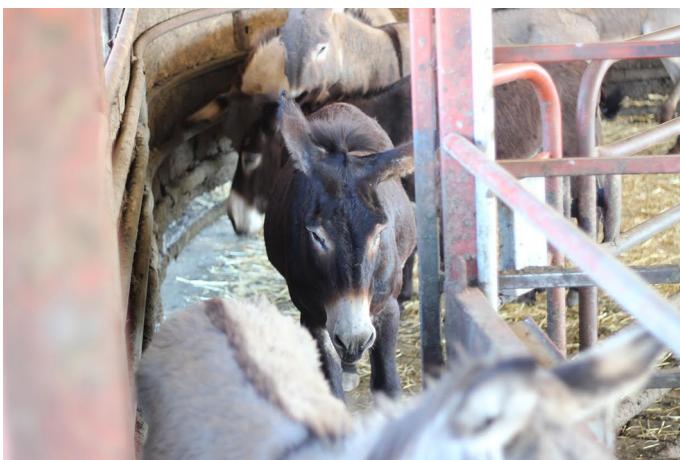
APPENDIX I

Donkeys protecting sheep

In the yards



Walking on command



Guarding their flocks

